

# STONE HARBOR

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## How To Grab Hold Of What's Most Important

Mark 7:1-23

### INTRODUCTION

None of us want to live our lives and not do what is most important. Yet many of us have spent a lot of time doing things we would now rightly call unimportant.

Today we will look at how we can grab hold of what is most important in life and spend our time doing those things.

Our text: Mark 7:1-23

#### I. Locate the Hidden **Dangers** that Derail

Hidden = subtle, possibly even intentionally deceptively disguised (echos of the Fall)

Derail = take us off God's course

The strength in which Jesus' confronted the Pharisees and the scribes (Jewish religious leaders) indicates the significance of their error and calls us to understand it, at the very least, so that we might not find ourselves on the receiving end of such a strong rebuke from our Lord.

Their gripe sounds legitimate:

In verse 7 the religious leaders challenge Jesus, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to **the tradition of the elders**, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (7:5b)

One would have expected Jesus' response to such a question to be more like, "You have a point, my mom did teach me to wash my hands before I ate; and it is polite to respect my elders..."

But Jesus doesn't take that passive learner role at all; instead he comes back in verse 6 with:

"Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites,...

And then He quotes the OT to these OT experts:

'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,  
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.  
'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,  
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'

And concludes in v. 8:

"Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

Ouch! These are words with a bite. Jesus looks them in the eye and places on them the condemnation they have placed on others, but certainly never would have placed on themselves.

Q: What in the world had these nice religious men done such that amidst all of their good intentions they have fallen so far short that Jesus regarded them as hypocrites?

A: Somehow they had slipped into approaching God with lip service only, while their heart was actually far from God; and though they did the activity they called worship, their worship was actually done in "vain" because they were teaching people ideas of men and saying "Thus sayeth the Lord..."

They faced a set of very real dangers! These are threats, maybe even traps set for well intentioned religious people – traps set to cause them to miss what is most important because they are involved in the hustle and bustle of their religious activity.

I can not stand at a distance and condemn the error of the religious folk of Jesus day without evaluating whether or not we are falling into the same dangerous trap.

If we are to get what God says is **most important** we are going to have to **Locate the Hidden Dangers that Deraill** us from our movement towards life as God intended.

Where are these dangers – these traps? In verse 9-11 ...

A. We see some of the dangers lie in our own religious organizations and practices

With strong conviction Jesus calls them to task and gives them an example from their own lives:

9 He was also saying to them,  
 "You are experts at setting aside **the commandment of God**  
 in order to keep your **tradition.**

10 "For Moses said,  
**'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER';**  
 and,  
**'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER,**  
**IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH';**

11 but you say,  
 'If a man says to his father or his mother,  
 whatever I have that would help you is Corban  
 (that is to say, given to God),'

Explanation of the practice highlighting the error –

Then Jesus evaluates for them the terrible effect of this hypocrisy:

12 you no longer permit him to do anything  
 for his father or his mother;  
 13 thus invalidating **the word of God**  
 by **your tradition which you have handed down;**

and you do many things such as that."

Summary of Dangerous Error – So the organized religion of the day allowed for religious practices that stood in direct conflict with “the word of God.”

B. But ultimately, the source of these dangers actually lies in our own self seeking selves.

Jesus did not, in this passage, take issue with the synagogue or with the religious organization as a whole, but with the people who make up that organization and most clearly with it's leaders.

We are the source of many of our own dangers! Where do the dangers lie in your life? Let me throw out some possible hiding places and as I do, think with me about dangers that could derail you.

### **Danger lies in...**

1. Our desire to do something that makes us presentable to God – they wanted to wash up to be pure, and we want to clean up our act so that we are somehow good enough to warrant God's approval.
2. Our laziness that keeps us from expending the energy required to search the scriptures for ourselves and think clearly about what matters to God.

3. Our seemingly benign tendency to want to perpetuate the religious traditions we have enjoyed.
4. Our natural human defensiveness that rejects challenges to the paradigm we have come to accept.
5. Danger even lies in our own hopes and dreams to be used by God according to way we have always wished God would use us.

If any of these things resonate with you. Watch out! There is danger there -- danger that we get trapped into doing religious activities originating from the good ideas of man, but activity that actually prevents us from doing what God has commanded us to do.

These trapped the religious leaders of Jesus day, they can trap you and me! They are breaks in the rail we are traveling on. They are traps camouflaged in the activities of the church. They are subtle, even hidden, probably by the deceiver.

So the first thing we need to do is locate the hidden dangers that derail us; and the second is that we must learn what is most important in the eyes of God.

## II. Learn What is **Most Important**

I say Learn or maybe even better, capture (instead of KNOW) because we will have to actively pursue – even fight through the crowded activity-rich context of our lives to know what is most important.

### **A. What's Most Important According to This Passage**

1. God's Commandments Not Man's Traditions
2. Your Heart not Your Lips
  - a. Not what you say
  - b. Not what you eat
3. God's Plan of Redemption In Christ Not Man's Plan of Self Cleansing

### **B. What's Most Important According to Mark's Story to Date**

The shout that comes out of Mark is that **Jesus changes everything and is the center point for all things!**

**What's most important?**

**It is Jesus Himself!**

### **Who Jesus Is so Far in Mark**

- a. Christ
- b. Son of God
- c. The one OT Scripture prophesied would be announced by John
- d. The one who was mightier than John
- e. The one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit
- f. The one upon whom the Spirit descended upon like a dove after His baptism
- g. The one of whom God said, "Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well pleased."
- h. The one tempted by Satan in the wilderness, but without sin
- i. The one who angels ministered to.
- j. The one who came preaching the gospel of God
- k. The one who said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."
- l. The one who called disciples to Himself saying, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."
- m. The one who was teaching with such authority that those who heard were amazed.
- n. The one even the demons recognized as, "The Holy One of God."
- o. The one who with a word exorcised authority over demons casting them out of those they possessed.
- p. The one who demonstrated again and again His ability to heal the sick
- q. The one who prayed
- r. The one who came in order to preach
- s. The one who demonstrated His divine ability to forgive sins
- t. The one who came to minister to the sinners not the self proclaimed righteous
- u. The one who presented Himself as the bridegroom to the bride
- v. The one who called Himself the Son of Man
- w. The one who is Lord of the Sabbath
- x. The one who was angered at the hardness of the hearts of the religious
- y. The one called, "The Son of God" by the demons He exorcised.
- z. The one who appointed 12 to be with Him in order that He might send them out to preach and have authority over demons.

That is what is most important in Mark – it is Jesus.

### **C. What's Most Important According to the Rest of Scripture**

1. In General -- That by means of Jesus as king of God's Kingdom, God is unseating Satan and redeeming mankind and all of creation from its fallen tarnished state to the perfect renewed and recreated state that was His intention from all eternity.

2. For Us -- That by means of Jesus coming as king of God's Kingdom, God is establishing communion with mankind in the perfect Father-son relationship that exists between God the Father and Jesus and can exist between God and us in as much as we are united by faith to Jesus. In our union with Christ we are united with God the Father all this by means of the Spirit.

#### **D. Helpful Questions for determining what is most important**

There is so many things we could do in trying to live our life in proper relation to God. How do we evaluate what is most important to do? I am helped by asking a couple of questions:

1. What did Jesus teach God's most important commandment to be?

Mark 12 -- Love

2. What does the reality of Jesus call us to do?

We'll get to ask this questions at the end of the message of some things I see as less than most important

So we locate the hidden dangers that derail us; and we learn what **is** most important in the eyes of God; and the third thing we have to do is grab hold of what's most important. But the first step of grabbing hold of anything is letting go of what is currently in your hands. What are we (the religious folk of our day) holding on to that could properly be called, "traditions of men" which (well intentioned as they may have been in their origins) are now occupying our hands so that we can't fully embrace God who has come to us in Christ Jesus.

### **III. Grab Hold of What's Most Important**

#### **A. First, We Must Free Our Hands -- Let Go of Religious Traditions Conflicting with God's Commandments**

You have heard of course how they catch monkeys in the bush. They put bait in a gourd with a thin neck, tie the gourd to something sturdy. The monkey reaches his hand in and grabs the bait but in so doing makes a fist bigger than the neck of the gourd. He will not let go, busily, greedily hanging on even as his captor approaches. There as some things we should really let go of.

The silly "monkeys" of Jesus time should have let go of the traditions of men that morphed into religious activity they thought was important but that actually kept them away from embracing the God they "worshipped" with their lips but not their heart – the God who came to them in the person of Jesus Christ.

Will others look in on us and say silly "monkeys," I can't believe they hung on to ...

What is it that we as individual church members are holding to that encumbers our hands from embracing Jesus as Son of God, Savior,

Lord, Redeemer, King, Friend...? What is it as a gathered church that we are busying ourselves with that keeps us from being the church God intended us to be – the church that loves God and one another, the church that makes disciples and is His witness in the world? And what is most important that we should be grabbing hold of instead?

Let me pass something by you that could be our washing of hands and eating only certain foods. It is the...

### **The prominence of the Sunday Worship service**

Somewhere along the way we have picked up the tradition of man that says Sunday morning is the focus of our church life. It is not! We don't **go** to church, we don't **do** church, we **are** the church. And we are the church just as much on Monday as on Sunday. On Sunday we are together for an hour and a half. We are then the church gathered doing collectively what we should be doing individually all week long: worshiping, praying, giving ear to the word of God, communing with Him as an honoring son to His worthy father, loving Him and our neighbors.

How does the importance we place on our Sunday Worship service not properly deal with the reality of Jesus? Jesus did not come to be thought of only once a week. He came to connect us to God for every second of every day and for all time and eternity.

Several related traditions have sprung up.

### **The church service as our primary point of evangelism.**

Somewhere along the line the church in America has picked up the tradition of man that says evangelism needs to take place first and foremost in the church – meaning on Sunday mornings at the worship service. It does not! If you are a member of the church by virtue of your faith in Jesus and your union with Him, you are the evangelist to people you share life with. Sure, Sunday morning could, and maybe even should reach out to the unbeliever. But it must not be the primary place of evangelism in our church life.

So, how does regarding our church service as the primary point of evangelism not properly respond to who Jesus is? Remember, the role of the pastor-teacher according to Eph 4 is to equip the saints for the work of ministry – including the ministry of evangelism.

### **The pastor as polished presenter**

Somewhere along the line the church in America has picked up the tradition of man that says the pastor needs to be Jerry Seinfeld and Billy Graham all rolled into one. He needs to serves up a good show of

gospel truth while we form our opinions and call in our votes. I covenant with you to do my absolute best to develop my speaking skills so that I am not a weight but a wing to the word of God; but brothers and sisters come with grace and eagerness to learn and a willingness to push through my presentational shortcomings to the valuable truth of God I am trying with all my heart, mind, soul and strength to communicate.

How does pastor as polished presenter not account for Jesus? The pastor is not the replacement for Jesus and His message, rather he is just Jesus' under-shepherd pointing people to Him. The most talked about man in the church should not be, must not be Johnny, it must be Jesus. For the church to be healthy it must not be focused on it's pastor, it must be focused on Jesus who's church it surely is.

### **The church member as passive recipient of the professional's ministry**

Somewhere along the line the church in America has picked up the tradition of man that says the church member's primary role in the church is to passively receive the ministry of the professionals and give their money and serve it's programs. I do the preaching, the worship leader does the music, you sit and listen and be impressed with how well we do our jobs and then congratulate us after. No! Brothers and sisters in Christ, your ministry to me and one another is as important as my ministry to you.

How does the member as passive recipient not deal correctly with Jesus? Jesus did not come to save me that I might minister to you, He came to save all of us that we might minister one to another.

If I can put my finger on the hand washing trap of our time it is this focus of the American church on the importance of the Sunday worship service and the related traps I've outlined. What do we do to avoid these traps?

On Sunday morning come hungry, come ready to eat, come ready to worship and pray and serve and love; but come knowing this: the Sunday morning church gathered is just the huddle; that [outside these walls] is the game! This is the briefing room; that is the battle ground. This is the harbor; that is the open ocean on which you were designed to sail.

### ***Conclusion***

The religious folk of Jesus' day missed Him as the center. His own disciples at first missed who He was, even in the light of all the miracles He did in front

of them. He fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and they missed that He was the bread of life. May we not repeat their dullness.

The church of our day has picked up some traditions of man along the way too. Some are dangerous traditions. We've got to let them go so that we may have open hands to embrace the bridegroom of the church who hung on that cross; so that we may **be** the redeemed of the Redeemer's intentions; and so that we can give ourselves to the activities He **has** redeemed us to do. Activities including but also beyond Sunday worship service.

I want to let go of something less important this morning so I can grab hold of what's most important according to God. [take hand out of trap and walk to back]

Look at the cross. We need to make sure that we always look at the cross and don't get distracted by the servants at the foot of the cross. They are good guys, well intentioned, with some skill, but they are not Jesus, they are just like you, only serving in a role that puts them up front instead of in a seat on Sunday morning. We must focus on Him who hung there on the cross, not on him who stands beneath it.

I believe we as individuals and Stone Harbor, loving God and neighbor as a local church will soar when all of us see Jesus for who He is and give ourselves every day of every week to the task of glorifying Him in everything we do; first in knowing Him ourselves and simply being the children of God He intended us to be.

One of the great teachings of the Reformation is the teaching of salvation by grace through faith alone – not by works. The religious people of Jesus day had their hands full cleaning themselves up so that they would be pure enough to approach God. There was a time and a place and a people for that. The time was the time before Jesus, the place was the temple, the people were the Levitical priests. But, when Jesus came, He did not just do some miracles for the good of those He crossed paths with – He changed everything!

He was the perfectly pure lamb that was slain on that cross to take make you pure in a way that no ritual washing, no work of your well intentioned religious piety could or will ever do.

We do not wash up, work our way up, dress up, wise up or exert any human effort which can effectively make us pure in the eyes of God. He did that work from that cross. God extends saving grace to us from the cross declaring us righteous not because we are but because we are united by faith to Him who is.

Look upon the cross.

Romans 4:5 “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

The religious of Jesus day were derailed by the religious works that had men not God as their source. May we not be derailed by being caught up in the traditions of our own religious culture. May we look neither to the right nor to the left at other churches floating in the same strong cultural current which confuses our thinking, but may we look to the cross and He who hung upon it for our true north.

May we make sure all of what we do properly responds to who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

Let's pray.